

Concerns Me No More

by Lois Spangler



Day 12, Early Morning: The Beginning, Fall 434 Tz

-From the personal written accounts of Kastali, Nightwitch-

This day marked the beginning of our work to recover a most important item. I am pleased to have been assigned to this task; it has offered me the opportunity to continue my ascension along the paths of power and knowledge.

In our group, there are five of us in total: Vinida, a Nightstalker; Ossu, a Mindsifter; Erlich, a Nightfiend; Thant, a Seething Knight; and myself: Kastali, a Nightwitch.

Most of us arrived at the pier just moments after the Necromancers finished their work. Erlich accompanied the lords on their mission, to clandestinely execute the captain and crew for the Necromancers to reanimate. The Xandressan captain, boarder, first mate, and navigator were taken, rendered zombies before their minds and memories fully deserted their bodies, and only two or three of the rest of the crew were dispatched in such a manner as to make them useless for reanimation. Such losses, sadly, cannot be avoided.

It became clear that our operation called no attention to the ship; no guards arrived, no curious neighbors came out to investigate. We had managed to work in darkness and silence. It took no time for us to settle ourselves in the ship, a strong trading vessel of Xandressan registry.

Lord Rami, one of the two Necromancers assigned to assist us in our work, speaks to no one but Lord Enmai. Lord Enmai speaks to us only when necessary. However, Lord Enmai does address me as would befit my rank, so I find myself a little more willing to tolerate Lord Rami's indifference.

Lord Enmai declared that he and Rami would guide the ship towards our destination in the Shyft Isles, though they would not assist us in the recovery of the item which we were being sent to retrieve. It seemed a shame, in my mind; if this artifact was so rare and unique, wouldn't one want to send as many competent combatants as possible in order to ensure success?

The interior of the Xandressan ship was well-appointed and more comfortable than I would have expected. There were bunks instead of hammocks, and the food in the mess hall was of a quality I certainly wouldn't insist on having during an over-water journey. Such frivolity, I fear, makes one soft. And though I would be loath to belittle the skill and cunning of my fellow warriors, if the quarters hadn't been so luxurious, perhaps the captain and crew wouldn't have fallen so easily.

The structure of the ship, however, was beautiful, in the same way that a keen and efficient blade is beautiful. There was no wasted line, no extraneous curve or plank. Everything that was there was necessary, and what was not, wasn't. It was built for speed, though I fear it wouldn't stand up to much more than a naval scuffle. I am confident that it would outrun most, if not all, aggressors.

Day 12, Evening: The Ship, Fall 434 Tz

It is now clear why the Necromancers chose this ship. The navigation room is one of the most current I have seen, though my experience in ships has been limited. There are detailed charts of the most commonly traveled waters, and there are one or two charts—sketchy, at best, though more than I expected—of the waters around the Shyft Isles.

We chose to wait till the morning to depart, at the time arranged by the captain when she was still alive, so as not to arouse anyone's suspicion. The navigator, in his undead haze, has mentioned something about the dockmaster having a taste for wine; perhaps in the morning he will be addled by a hangover, and not prone to causing us any difficulties.

Day 13, Day: Departure, Fall 434 Tz

Early in the morning Hali, the dockmaster, came by, checking on the ship before its departure. I was correct in my assumption; the dockmaster was at our ship only for show. He had a nearly permanent wince from what I imagined must have been a brutal headache.

Lord Enmai masterfully puppeteered the captain into dismissing the dockmaster. Then, under cloak of light fog, against which Hali warned us, we left. The seas were calm and smooth as glass, and aside from the mist, our passage was swift into the harbor.

The captain, a woman of approximately middle age, if I am judging the lines of her face correctly, is highly competent. I daresay she may have been more valuable to us alive. As Thant had no interest in rummaging through the items of the dead, I was fortunate enough to be the one to search the

captain's quarters. Her travels must have taken her far and wide in life. Among her personal effects were a small blade that is, if I am not mistaken, of Amazon make, and there was a trinket, a bracelet, fitted with charms made of the white and yellow stones the Galeshi find so handsome.

During the journey, Lord Rami has taken it upon himself to control the crew, while the captain remains under Lord Enmai's watchful eye.

Day 14: Planning, Fall 434 Tz

The navigator is also competent, but young. He explained to us in his own limited fashion that it will take five days for us to reach the Shyft Isles, if weather favors us and the Dhokonios Strait is merciful. It could take as long as ten days if weather and the Strait give us trouble.

The captain, navigator, and both Necromancers have agreed that the best landing site is a flat cove on the western strand of one of the larger islands; Vinida has taken to calling it the Devil's Elbow. A spur dangling from the elbow itself makes a small natural harbor that should assist in our landing.

There is a debate regarding the hour of our landing. Should we land at night, to stay unseen? How wise is it to tread on another's domain in darkness?

Darkness holds an advantage; we work best under cloak of night, it comforts us, it gives us strength. However, we are landing in a place we have never really seen; the reports from wayward spies and loosely drawn charts can only be partly believed, at best. And the Shyft, with their Mage Spawn lackeys, will be active at all hours, and are familiar with their own territory.

I volunteered that an afternoon landing may be best; Vinida can scout passages for us while there is still light, and we may be better able to see ambushes or attacks in the waning evening. Once night falls, however, we may travel hidden and silently, attracting as little attention as possible. I would rather save our strength for the adversaries that will surely arise from the great stone temple housing the artifact, than waste our energy cutting through the menagerie that is sure to lie within the thick jungle.

What I do find of some concern is a deep fen, running directly across the path we intend to take to the temple which houses the artifact. Considering the width of the island, I wouldn't consider the water very deep, and we will likely find that it is easily navigable. However, water slows us down, and may make us easy targets for an ambush. But we may lose a significant amount of time walking around the fen, and give our enemies enough time to discover our whereabouts, long before we reach the temple.

Date 15, Day: Dhokonios Strait, 434 Tz

I was awoken this morning by rough seas. I wonder if hammocks aren't more comfortable for ocean travel; though they may rock, one certainly isn't jostled out of sleep by a wayward swell, at least not as easily as if one were on a flat plank.

I dressed and went up on deck, where Lord Enmai and the captain were at the wheel, fighting the water. A cruel line of black clouds curled at the horizon, and a few fat drops splattered against my face.

I believe it will take us more than five days to get to the Shyft Isles.

I have heard tales of the Dhokonios Strait, most of which I regarded with a healthy dose of cynicism. Sea travel and I do not agree, and I would eat my words now if my stomach were settled enough for it. The cliffs of Delphane loom behind us and to our right, glowing weakly in the cold gray light of dawn. The winds fling themselves off the cliffs and against our ship as if their only purpose were to smash and drown any vessel escaping Xandressan harbors and enter truly open seas. And by the look of the skies, it only promises to get worse.

I can only help but wonder if perhaps it is the inherently magical nature of the isle of Delphane that drives the water and weather to such madness. Was it this inherent magical energy that manifested in Delphane's most famous native son—Tezla? In the very far distance, almost entirely behind us now, I can see the Windsong Monument glimmer—a tiny white point in the far distance, like a star against the black, roiling skies beyond.

The boat is lurching worse now, and Lord Enmai has requested me to return below decks. Though his cowl is low, I suspect he's feeling about as settled as I am.

Day 17: Anticipation, Fall 434 Tz

Yesterday was impossible, or nearly impossible, since we have actually made our way through it. Winter weather is always difficult and dangerous through the Strait, the navigator said, when he wasn't busy making sure we didn't drift into stony outcroppings just low enough not to be seen, but just high enough to rip the hull of a passing ship.

It is so diabolical that I cannot help but think the arrangement of such an environment is intentional. Ancient, but certainly intended.

Thant has slowly been growing more and more excited; he is eager to fight again. Vinida spends most of his time in the crow's nest, searching for other vessels. So far we have been alone at sea.

Ossu has spent time reading over the captain's diaries; if he had not reached them before me, I would have been the one reading them. But it seems I have saved myself some time. The Mindsifter has discarded them, I would imagine from boredom. I briefly checked for torn or missing pages, but the books were intact. In fact, they were filled with numbers and values, balance sheets and accounts.

No personal life for a Xandressan captain, it would seem.

Date 18, Day: Early Arrival, Fall 434 Tz

It looks like this evening we will land. The captain has reclaimed some time by catching an ocean current; the navigator has been hard at work making sure we have not veered off course. Vinida has spotted some distant flocks of seabirds in the far, far distance. Thant and Erlich have been talking more and more, recounting past battles and achievements. I question the wisdom of letting another know so much about one's self; knowledge is power. Always.

Ossu has kept to himself, occasionally standing on the bridge, watching the endless line of the ocean. I think he's worried about the Shyft Mind Thieves. So far, Ossu has never had to deal with a taste of his own medicine. He knows he is here to counteract the thought-clouding of the Mind Thieves, but since the Sect is the only organized group to employ the art of clouding minds, we have never found it necessary to learn to defend against it. I can only comfort myself with knowing that we employ those tactics of confusion, and so we should be more prepared for them if they should be used against us. For all his failings—the Mindsifter is too reticent for his own good, if he wants to make his way in the Sect—Ossu is competent and capable. Otherwise, he would not be traveling with us.

Day 18, Late Afternoon: The Devil's Elbow, Fall 434 Tz

The hour arrived, and we unanimously decided to bring most of the zombie crew along. Lords Enmai and Rami relinquished control of all the undead, save a handful of zombies to tend the ship and assist in navigation, should we fail, to myself and remained behind on the ship.

Devil's Elbow was thick with dark green vegetation; I have never seen anything like it. For a moment I felt we might be fighting trees and vines more than Shyft or Spawn. As we rode in the two small boats—the Xandressan ship would have run aground in the shallow waters—Ossu softly chanted beside me, weaving a clouding spell, making it harder for enemies to notice our arrival.

We were nearly at the shore when, bubbling up from the depths of the water below, rose a number of foul creatures, their fishy arms and hands reaching up for our little boats.

I suspect they had been placed there to overtake any invader; we had not necessarily been tracked to the cove. However, I had to contend with the possibility that we had indeed been seen, and we were walking into an ambush.

I heard Vinida's bow behind me, in the other boat, and Thant's sword slicing through air and more. The captain, who still held most of her mind and spirit, was tearing through Spawn on the opposite side, making the boat lurch sharply. It was safer for me to stay low; the boat was so small and another sword would have cut allies just as easily as enemies. Instead I began to row, bringing us closer to shore, and away from the Spawn.

Ossu leaned out of the boat and began chanting again. His voice was a little higher, a little more sibilant. Was he losing his nerve?

Soon the sea monsters—Deep Spawn, I was certain—began rising into perfect line for Thant or the boarder or the captain to behead them, or for Vinida to plant an arrow between their fishy eyes. Thant demanded that I bring back a number of them into our service, but I refused; Deep Spawn are a liability in anything but water. And I was busy keeping our zombies under control. Though I didn't intend to anger him, it served a purpose; he fights better when he feels he's thwarted.

Within moments the buffeting of the hull against the sand poured us out onto the shore. Some of the Deep Spawn followed, but by then their numbers had been thinned by my fellow warriors and our zombies.

The navigator and I came up to the tree line, looking for a way into the thick growth. With some keen observation and not a little effort on the part of the navigator's cutlass, we managed to open a small way into a greater clearing. I could smell the swamp not far away.

Vinida called for us to move ahead; he and the boarder stayed behind to finish off the rest of the Spawn. I ordered the navigator to cut the opening wider, so Vinida could find it easily, and I gathered everyone through the jungle wall, into a small clearing of tree roots and layers of old leaves.

Thant walked a little further into the jungle, until his boots squelched in mud. He returned and told us he'd run into the fen, but that he'd also found a fallen tree that might allow us to cross.

It seemed to be an unexpected stroke of luck, but once we arrived to examine the log, it was clear that we wouldn't be the first to use it. Wary of another attack, I waved at the navigator to go investigate. He walked up on the log, surprisingly nimble for an undead, and crossed, reaching the other side with no adverse effect.

At that moment Vinida and the boarder caught up with us. Vinida was untouched; the boarder was far worse for the wear.

Then, behind us, back where we'd left the boats, a soft lilting sound floated through the air. It was strange and foreign and very beautiful. And it was followed by the sounds of shuffling in the sand.

Thant leapt onto the log and began to cross, beckoning all of us forward. The shuffling and the music drew closer, and I ordered the zombies across next, in case another underwater ambush was waiting for a larger group of people. They crossed successfully, as did all of us, eventually. And we stood there, at the crown of the dead tree, listening to the piping echoing in the jungle.

Erlich let out a yell; something had hit him from the side, in the tangle of vines and branches—and that's when we realized that in order to avoid an ambush, we had walked ourselves right into a trap!

We arranged ourselves in a circle, back-to-back, and saw a number of creatures, apes in tattered clothing wielding primitive weapons, rattled out of the forest around us. They howled and roared; several fell dead instantly from arrows and swords. I placed myself closer to the center of the group; those half-sentient animals that hadn't been damaged too badly I brought back from the dead, ordering them to rise and take their place at our side.

Ossu worked hard to keep the enemy from working together, but I'm afraid they were too stupid for his magic to affect them at all. He kept close to me as we made our way towards the temple, which we couldn't see yet through the trees.

Suddenly Ossu was gone, snatched from behind me in a gout of squelching mud. The mud took on a vaguely human form, fighting to keep some part of itself over the Mindsifter's face, preventing him from seeing, or, more importantly, breathing.

I had to keep Thant from attacking the Animated Mud for fear that he would cut Ossu to pieces. Instead I ordered our zombie apes to pull water from the swamp in their helmets and pour it over Ossu. In the meantime, our other zombies and Thant and Erlich returned to tearing apes apart.

The piping grew nearer and more frequent, as if there were more than one musician. The possessed mud lost grip of Ossu, who leapt free of it, but the ape zombies who had been throwing water on it became entangled in its muck. As far as I was concerned, the mud could have them.

The rest of the apes were eliminated; Vinida declared that he had seen glimpses of a tall stone structure not too far away.

Day 18 Night: The Lost City, Fall 434 Tz

We followed him for nearly an hour through narrow gaps in vines and branches until we came upon a clearing, a space in the jungle free of growth.

It was paved with stone, large square blocks of it. Some were shattered, some were missing corners, but all were overgrown with grasses and weeds and the occasional hopeless sapling. Not much further were the remnants of a long lost city, crumbling buildings bearing the weight of jungle vines and flowers.

The style was unrecognizable to me, ancient in design. The sound of flowing water echoed nearby, closer than the piping now muffled by the growth around us.

Vinida volunteered to scout ahead, though the very top of the temple we were sent to find was visible maybe a half mile away. Erlich declared he would take up the rear and prevent a surprise attack from the mysterious pipers.

Vinida had been gone only minutes before Erlich called out. He described two Shyft, each with a pipe, coaxing a small group of lobstermen out of the swamp we had just crossed.

So there had been an ambush planned, but it hadn't come off in time! Was that because we'd taken the Shyft by surprise?

Vinida returned and told us of a relatively clear path to the foot of the temple, which seemed to be guarded by two Shyft with blowguns—Heart Seekers. Erlich relayed that the lobstermen were getting closer, but that he'd lost sight of one of the Pipers.

We agreed to keep moving forward, staying as low and quiet as we could. I went along with Thant and the zombies, who had no hope of being stealthy.

Vinida led us through twisting streets, amid boxes of stone whose purpose was now completely lost. Were they homes or stores? Taverns or offices? It was impossible to tell.

And then we came upon the fountain. It was completely out of place in the ruins of the city. Its stone was pristine, and it nearly sang with magic. Clean water bubbled up from a floral shape at the top and spilled down to a pool below.

If there had been time, I would have investigated further. Was it a scrying pool? Or was it a place for citizens to drink fresh water, a place to gather and talk as the day wore on?

We moved on through the tight tangle of buildings. The streets beneath our feet were paved. Some streets were in better condition than others, but there was no place within the city where, in its day, a citizen would have walked upon bare earth.

Day 18, Night: The Temple Guards, Fall 434 Tz

Vinida stopped us. We had not been approached or waylaid by Shyft or Spawn, which was enough to make us nervous, but if we held the advantage, then it would serve us to maintain it.

Two Heart Seekers stood at the foot of the stairs of the temple. We had been told that the artifact was in the interior, but I saw no way to get inside. Vinida explained that there likely was an entrance to the temple at the very top.

I suggested that Erlich and Vinida take the guards out—Erlich by carefully placing himself behind one of the Shyft unseen, and Vinida from a distance with his bow.

Thant agreed. The two warriors placed themselves in position; the moment one of the Shyft faltered from a fatal blow from the Nightfiend, Vinida planted two arrows in the other Shyft—in the head and heart.

Half a moment later, the Shyft rose again and awaited our arrival. We reached the foot of the steps, high and narrow, and Thant verified what Vinida had said. The entrance to the temple was at the very top.

We marched up, unchallenged. The temple was high above the canopies of the trees, garbed in thick vines so that it wouldn't be immediately recognizable for what it was from a distance. It was a large pyramid shape, with sides that stepped up as they went.

At the top platform of the temple were three small holes and a large opening cut into the corners of the floor. A wide set of steps led down from the largest hole.

Day 18, Night: Inside the Temple, Fall 434 Tz

Thant put one foot on a step, and then the world became a blur of green as the vines on the temple came alive, grasping at us and pulling with unnatural strength.

Swords were drawn on all sides; the zombie Heart Seekers stowed their blowguns and wrapped their hands around the tendrils of the animate vines. In the fight, we lost the navigator, who was torn apart by the ravaging flora. The Heart Seekers held their own, clearing a path for us to reach the stairs unhindered. Thant swung his sword with unmitigated wrath and joy; Vinida stayed well out of his way and used his own blade, knowing his bow was useless. The captain and her boarder kept themselves free of the vines with their own cutlasses; I resorted to my knife, as did Ossu, who was still wary and nervous, looking out for Mind Thieves.

Erich stood near enough to Thant to stay clear of the vines; he reached into a bag he had slung under his cloak and removed a small flask, which he uncorked. He spread the fluid around himself, leaving a free lane to the stairway, and called to me to spark a flame.

Flame as a battlefield weapon isn't something I can do, but a spark, a simple flicker of flame, is nothing to me—a trick learned in the earliest part of training, decades ago.

Erich had spread oil over the vines, and I had ignited the fuel.

The vines withdrew, rattling in what I can only assume was pain. We took advantage of the opportunity and dashed down the stairway towards a landing not far away.

The passage became a series of plateaus and ramps. More than once we heard clicks, like things arming, as we traveled down towards the bottom of the temple. Vinida and Ossu would stop occasionally to try and discover the source of the sounds, to search for traps, but it was futile. Erlich found torches along the walls and asked me to ignite those as well.

Thant took the lead; Vinida guarded the rear, in case anyone chose to follow us down. Every so often, and very faintly, we could sometimes hear the sounds of pipes filtering in from outside.

As we neared the final plateau of the walkway, a different sound rose up, the sound of a low voice, chanting. Ossu tensed, and I could see him straining to hear.

Day 18, Night: Heart of the Temple, Fall 434 Tz

Thant directed the zombies to move forward and take the lead. The Shyft and the crew did as they were told, and we stayed a few feet behind.

Then we turned the final corner, to come face to face with a man who had no face. All his skin had been removed, though he was robed in the finest linens and spun gold.

The flayed man grinned like a skull at us and told us we were not invited. And then it incinerated our front line.

We lost one of the Shyft immediately; the boarder was consumed beyond recovery. The captain had managed to be only singed, and two other crew members were also only partially damaged. Then our attacker vanished.

Behind him stood a small pedestal, and on that pedestal was a piece of a larger thing, like a stone that has been broken. It was a single jewel, set in fine gold, shining as brightly as the day it was made.

I knew it was a trap. We stood back to back, as close as we could. There was no way to know when the skinned guard would next appear.

It chose to attack and we were all engulfed in flame; the captain, though in the direct line of fire, managed to get her cutlass into the skinless creature. It cried out and the flame stopped.

Thant swung at the place he'd last heard the enemy; though he missed on the way in, he managed to tag the enemy on the way out. A bit of ichor spilled on the ground, leaving a trail for us to follow.

Suddenly the bloody trail turned directly toward us, moving slowly and deliberately, directly into Thant and the captain. Ossu muttered quietly beside me, his enchantments working perfectly.

The two sword wielders elicited a gout of ichor from the enemy, but in retaliation they each received a brutal blast of lightning. Thant fell back towards us. The captain rose no more.

I moved toward the pedestal, but received a fierce shock for my efforts. The skinless warrior was nothing to be trifled with.

Ossu drew me back and pointed at Erlich, who was moving to try the same thing.

Our Seething Knight was in full fury and would not be stopped. The last of our remaining crew fell to him as he cut through them to reach the enemy.

The enemy could no longer hide, and worse, he found himself drifting back towards the blades wielded by my comrades.

Instead of recovering the item, Erlich struck the monster from behind. It shrieked and crumpled, sending out a wave of flame from itself.

Thant was in very bad shape, as was Erlich. I was fine, but Ossu wasn't; he had borne the brunt of the attack for me.

I leapt over him and snatched the trinket from the pedestal. In a single moment, the sound of pipes shrilled loudly from the outside; the dead guard rose to his feet with an angry cry; and the temple shook with some unknown thunder.

Day 18, Night: Escape from the Temple, Fall 434 Tz

I called for us to escape; taking Ossu by the arm I dragged him up the first ramp, after which he was able to run on his own. The flayed guard roared furiously and sent blasts of flame towards us; in the flashes of light I saw Erlich creeping up behind the enemy, until all went quiet, and the guard made no more noise.

I never saw Erlich again.

I sent the remaining Shyft zombie ahead, in case something unpleasant was waiting for us at the top of the temple. But reaching the top was difficult enough; all the clicking we'd heard on the way down had triggered stones in the ramps to fall on the way back. Though the Heart Seeker was tripping a good number of those falling stones, enough were left alone to await our own feet. I nearly broke my leg on one of them.

Thant, though badly injured, made his way in front of me, as did Vinida. Ossu stayed back with me, and we were able to ascend with little more trouble. The Heart Seeker, however, lost a leg, and Vinida was running with a heavy limp.

We shot out of the temple, standing amid the burning remnants of the grasping vines. The shrill sounds of the pipes were deafening, and now we knew why: arrayed all around the temple, spilling back into the jungle, lined up in the streets of the ruined city, were rank after rank of Mage Spawn and their Guiding Shift.

And then a shimmering veil fell over me, and I felt a warmth I'd known only a few times before—Solonavi magic is a powerfully wondrous and unforgettable thing. I opened my hand, letting the broken amulet rest in my palm. Lord Heddravalis took it from me, then held my hand. The roar of the Shyft and Spawn dulled as the Solonavi magicked us away. Through the glowing mist, I saw my warriors and cohorts face down the countless enemy. Though their fate is clear to me, it concerns me no more. My task is done, and now I accept from my new masters the chance to fulfill my own limitless potential, completely outside the Sect. For I am certain it is my destiny to one day return to the Necropolis, heart and mind full of my new master's teachings, and destroy the Dark Prophet, taking my rightful place as ruler and master of the Dark Crusade.